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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 3458
INFO RUEHWL/AMEMBASSY WELLINGTON PRIORITY 1159
RUEHNZ/AMCONSUL AUCKLAND PRIORITY 0223
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 0214
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 1378
RUEHPB/AMEMBASSY PORT MORESBY 0973
RUEHDN/AMCONSUL SYDNEY 0622
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SUVA 000504

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/17/2016
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [ASEC](#) [CASC](#) [MARR](#) [KDEM](#) [TN](#)
SUBJECT: RIOTS DEVASTATE NUKU'ALOFA; TONGA IN UNEASY CALM
ON 11/17

REF: SUVA 500

Classified By: Ambassador Dinger. Sect. 1.4 (B) and (D)

Summary

1. (C) Up to 70% of downtown Nuku'alofa was laid to waste by rioters 11/16 after a pro-democracy demonstration ignited into the streets. The city now appears calm, but authorities are concerned about potential continued unrest. Media is reporting that six people were killed in the rioting. A number of ethnic Chinese, many of whose businesses were torched or vandalized during the riots, have reportedly tried to take refuge at the Chinese Embassy or the New Zealand High Commission residence. The Embassy Suva Consul, currently in Tonga, reports that no Americans were injured. The Peace Corps offices in Nuku'alofa were not damaged and all Peace Corps volunteers are safe and accounted for. Tongan military, reportedly armed, are guarding the TV and radio stations, public utilities and the King's residence. Democracy advocates announced on the evening of 11/16 that the government had agreed to a political reform proposal wherein 21 of 30 members of Parliament would be directly elected by the people. The remaining nine would be elected by nobles. The government has not yet confirmed this, though a high-ranking military officials told us an agreement had been reached. Government deliberations are taking place at the headquarters of the Tonga Defense Services (TDS) since most government buildings are damaged. PM Fred Sevele reportedly spent the night at TDS headquarters. His businesses were some of the main targets of the rioters. Sevele reportedly advocated asking for New Zealand security personnel to help quell the unrest, but the King and Cabinet disagreed. End summary.

Extensive Damage in Nuku'alofa; Chinese Seek Refuge;

2. (SBU) Embassy contacts tell us that up to 70% of the buildings in downtown Nuku'alofa either burned down November 16 or were so badly damaged that they will have to be razed. Targets of the rioters included Tonga's largest supermarket (owned by the PM), the ANZ Bank building (also owned by the PM), the Pacific Royale Hotel (owned by close associates of the King), Shoreline Corporation (owned by the King), Leiola Duty Free Shop (partly owned by the Princess), and numerous Chinese or Indian-owned shops. A number of other buildings burned after winds spread the fire to neighboring areas. Several government buildings were apparently vandalized. Contacts tell us that in addition to the damage in central

Nuku'alofa, a number of Chinese-owned shops on the main road out of the city were torched or vandalized. The Peace Corps office in Nuku'alofa (just on the edge of downtown), the New Zealand High Commission, and the Australian High Commission buildings all escaped unscathed.

13. (C) There have been no official reports of any casualties. However, media report that six people were killed in the riots. We have been unable to confirm that. We understand that many ethnic Chinese have attempted to take refuge at the Chinese Embassy, but the Embassy has "closed its doors." It is unclear how many, if any, persons the Embassy took in. A number of persons, Chinese and others, have sought refuge at the residence of the New Zealand High Commissioner. We understand that some, reportedly including PM Sevele's daughter (she runs the supermarket that was destroyed), have been granted access.

All Americans reportedly safe

14. (SBU) Embassy Suva Consul Debra Towry, in Tonga on a planned ACS visit, reports that all Americans in Tonga appear to be safe. All Peace Corps volunteers are accounted for. The city now appears calm. Our wardens outside Nuku'alofa report they are safe and that there are no signs of unrest. The Embassy issued a warden message today urging all Americans to avoid Nuku'alofa and its environs. Access to downtown Nuku'alofa is restricted in any case. Police and the military have cordoned off the area where most of the rioting took place. Sources tell us that the soldiers manning roadblocks are armed. Soldiers are also reportedly guarding the main public utilities, the TV and radio stations

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and the King's residence. There are some reports that soldiers are also guarding the PRC-invested Dateline Hotel. The government invoked emergency powers 11/17 proclaiming that the downtown area of Nuku'alofa "shall be controlled and maintained by the Tonga Police Force for the sole purpose of maintaining public order for all people of the country."

Government Deliberating at TDS Headquarters;
Sevele Reportedly Wants NZ Help

15. (C) Because of the extensive damage to government buildings, high-level governmental meetings are taking place inside the headquarters of the Tonga Defense Services, just outside downtown. We were told that PM Sevele spent the night of 11/16 there. The PM spoke to the nation via radio last night, calling for Tongans to stay calm and pray for the country. He noted that the police and military were working hard to restore security. We are unaware of any other official communications from the government. Contacts tell us that Sevele asked the Cabinet and the King for permission to request security personnel from New Zealand to help stabilize the situation. The Cabinet and King reportedly said no (septel).

Democracy Advocates Reach Agreement with the Government?

16. (C) Peoples' Representatives and democracy advocates 'Akilisi Pohiva, 'Isi Pulu, and Clive Edwards went on Tonga radio the evening of 11/16 to appeal for calm and to announce the government had given in to their demands for political reforms. They said the government had agreed that, starting with the 2008 elections, 21 Members of Parliament would be directly elected by the people, up from 9 at present. The remaining 9 members would be elected by the nobles (the same as at present). The government has not confirmed this agreement, but the Secretary of the Navy told us a deal had been reached. A close contact of Clive Edwards told us the agreement is in writing, crafted as the rioting was just beginning. This contact insisted that the violence began

because word had leaked out that PM Sevele had initially turned down the democracy advocates' proposal. By the time Sevele changed his mind, it was already too late. (Comment: We cannot verify this version of events. We do not know if any understanding would have the force of law, or if the rioting subsequent to the alleged agreement would have any effect on it. Parliament has not, as far as we know, taken action on any reform proposal. End comment.)

Comment - Not Out of the Woods Yet

17. (C) The authorities are clearly nervous about the prospect of further unrest this evening (11/17). We are continuing to advise all Americans to stay hunkered down for the time being. Our Consul will stay in Tonga until early next week, at least, to provide any assistance needed to American citizens in Tonga.

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